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ABSTRACT

A study sought to determine whether gender-related differences in communication style emerge developmentally. The study focused on assertive, egalitarian, and supportive communication styles rather than using the traditional dichotomous approach, which categorizes styles as feminine or masculine. Gender differences in self-identified communication styles, links between style and classmate support, and preferences for best friends and class leaders were assessed. Study participants were 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders at a suburban Denver elementary school. The 178 children listened to an audio recording of a conversation while following along with a written transcript. Three speakers represented assertive, egalitarian, and supportive styles differentiated along dimensions of dominance/submission, validation, clarity of feeling, and length of turn. The students answered questions regarding the conversation, their self-esteem and mood, and their perceptions of received classmate support. Results indicated that boys were more likely than girls to identify with the assertive style, whereas girls preferred the egalitarian style. Assertive children reported receiving less classmate support than supportive or egalitarian children. Overall, children preferred to have a best friend who was either egalitarian or supportive, but thought that an assertive person would make the best class leader. Finally, children whose ideal and real communication styles were the same reported high levels of self-esteem and mood. (AC)

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The Relationship between Communication Style and Perceived Classmate Support among Elementary School Children

Lisa M. Pettitt

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ABSTRACT

Most of the research on communication styles has concentrated on adults and has dichotomized styles as either feminine or masculine. On the other hand, the present study focussed on when gender-related differences emerge developmentally. In addition, a trichotomy of styles (Assertive, Egalitarian, and Supportive) was proposed to broaden the traditional dichotomous approach. Gender differences in self-identified communication styles were explored as were links between style and classmate support. Finally, preferences for best friends and class leaders, as related to communication style, were assessed. Third, fourth, and fifth grade students listened to an audio recording of a conversation while following along with a written transcript. They then answered questions regarding the conversation, their self-esteem and mood, and their perceptions of received classmate support.

Results indicated that a trichotomy of styles was appropriate for describing children's communication patterns. In terms of gender, boys were more likely to identify with the Assertive style, and girls with the Egalitarian style. In regard to classmate support, Assertive children reported receiving less than either Supportive or Egalitarian children. Overall, children preferred to have a best friend who was either Egalitarian or Supportive, but thought that an Assertive person would make the best class leader. Finally, children whose ideal and real styles were the same reported higher levels of self-esteem and mood than their "mismatched" counterparts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is a trichotomy of styles useful in describing children's communication patterns? Are there gender differences in the types of communication styles with which elementary school girls and boys identify?

2. Is one's self-identified communication style related to perceptions of support received from classmates?

3. How do children's preferences for best friends and class leaders relate to a person's communication style?

4. Are children whose self-identified REAL communication style matches their IDEAL style more likely to have high self-esteem and a positive mood than those whose real and ideal styles don't match?

METHOD

Participants were 178 students (89 females and 89 males) from a suburban Denver elementary school. There were 54 third graders, 65 fourth graders, and 59 fifth graders. Over 95% of the participants were European American and were from middle or upper-middle class families.

An audio-cameo methodology, in which participants simultaneously listened and read a transcript of a fictitious conversation, along with a questionnaire, were used to address the experimental questions. The three speakers in the conversation represented three communication styles (Assertive, Egalitarian, and Supportive), differentiated along four dimensions: (1) dominance/submission, (2) validation, (3) clarity of feelings, and (4) length of turn. Table 1 contains cameos further describing each style. Table 2 contains an excerpt from the conversation. The questionnaire contained items asking participants to report which of the speakers in the conversation was most like them, which speaker they would most like to be, which speaker they would want as a best friend, and which speaker would make the best class leader. In addition, there were items designed to assess participants' self-esteem, mood, and perceptions of classmate support. Sample questions from these scales are provided in Table 3.

RESULTS

1. The results indicate that most children identify with either the Egalitarian or Supportive speaker (42% and 41%, respectively), while a substantial minority identify with the Assertive speaker (17%). Gender differences were found, with girls more likely than boys to identify with the Egalitarian speaker (49% and 34%, respectively), and boys more likely than girls to identify with the Assertive speaker (24% and 11%, respectively). Figure 1 illustrates these findings.

2. Participants who said they were like the Assertive speaker reported lower levels of support from their classmates ($\underline{M}$ = 2.99) than did those who were like either the Egalitarian or Supportive speaker ($\underline{M}$ = 3.29 and $\underline{M}$ = 3.30, respectively). $\underline{t}(142) = 2.19$, $\underline{p} < .05$. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

3. Most participants preferred to have a best friend with either an Egalitarian or Supportive style (39% and 47%, respectively); only 14% said they would like an Assertive best friend. On the other hand, participants displayed a slight preference for an Assertive class leader (41%) over either an Egalitarian or Supportive class leader (32% and 26%, respectively). Figure 3 illustrates these findings.

4. Participants whose self-identified style matched their ideal style (i.e., the style they wanted to be) reported higher levels of both self-esteem and mood ($\underline{M}$ = 3.40 and $\underline{M}$ = 3.49, respectively) than did those whose real and ideal styles did not match ($\underline{M}$ = 3.17 and $\underline{M}$ = 3.22, respectively). Figure 4 illustrates these findings.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The data suggest that a need for alternatives to dichotomizing communication styles (e.g., trichotomies) exists. Given that substantial proportions of both girls and boys identified themselves with all three styles, using a dichotomy would have resulted in an incomplete description of children's communication patterns.

2. Results also provide some support for the emergence of gender-related differences in communication styles as early as third grade. Boys were more likely than girls to say they have an Assertive style, while girls were more likely than boys to say they have an Egalitarian style.

3. Findings indicated that Assertive children perceived less support from their classmates than did Egalitarian or Supportive children. This discrepancy, although small, may be due to Assertive children's tendency to dominate others, which may in turn distance them from their classmates. Also, Assertive children may appear not to need support, or think they don't need it, since they are inclined to express their opinions with certainty.

4. The findings related to preferences for best friend and class leader also support the notion that Assertiveness is associated with distancing from others and appearing not to need support from others. The Assertive speaker in the conversation was most likely to be rated as the best class leader, a person who would tend to be at some distance from others, whereas the Egalitarian and Supoortive speakers were more likely to be chosen for a best friend, a person who would likely be viewed as a partner in a mutually supportive relationship.

5. **Results confirmed that participants whose real and ideal styles matched (that is, those who think they have the qualities they want to have) are more likely to feel good about themselves and about their lives in general than do their nonmatched classmates (that is, those who don't think they have the qualities they want to have).**

Table 1: Cameos of Communication Styles

Assertive Style

Since I think that my own ideas are best, I disagree with others' ideas and just say what I want to do. I talk a lot because I am sure about what I want, and I want others to know what I am thinking. I don't always show that I like others' ideas because I think it is more important to get done making plans.

Egalitarian Style

I am sure about what I want and say what I want to do, but I also listen to what others say so I know what they want. I think about everybody's ideas when it is time pick what is best. Sometimes I agree and sometimes I disagree with others' ideas, but even if I don't always want to do what others want, I let them know that I thought about what they said.

Supportive Style

I think more about what others want, so I'm not always sure what I want. I don't talk much because I am listening more to find out what others want, and I agree with others' ideas, so they will be happy. I show others that I like their ideas, and I say that I want to do what the other kids want to do.

Table 2: Excerpts from Conversation Transcript

Assertive Child:

I still think the bus is better. I don't know why you want to go in a car. We can all go in one bus so that'll be easier. That's why we should take the bus. Let's just make a decision.

Egalitarian Child:

I don't mind taking the bus; it's OK with me, but I think we should make sure it's OK with everyone. Is it OK with you if we take the bus.

Supportive Child:

If that's what everybody else wants, taking the bus is OK with me. I'm not really sure what I want now anyway, but I'm glad you two thought about it.

Table 3: Items from Self-esteem, Mood, and Classmate Support Scales

Self-esteem

Really True for Me	Sort of True for Me				Sort of True for Me	Really True for Me
☐	☐	Some kids <u>don't</u> like the way they are leading their life	**BUT**	Other kids <u>do</u> like the way they are leading their life	☐	☐
☐	☐	Some kids think the way they do things is <u>fine</u>	**BUT**	Other kids <u>do not</u> think the way they do things is fine	☐	☐

Mood

☐	☐	Some kids are usually pretty <u>cheerful</u> about things in their life	**BUT**	Other kids are often <u>sad</u> about things in their life	☐	☐
☐	☐	Some kids feel kind of "down" and <u>depressed</u> a lot of the time	**BUT**	Other kids feel "up" and <u>happy</u> most of the time	☐	☐

Classmate Support

☐	☐	Some kids have classmates who do <u>not</u> want them to change the way they are	**BUT**	Other kids have classmates who do want them to change the way they are	☐	☐
☐	☐	Some kids have classmates who like most of the things they do	**BUT**	Other kids have classmates who do <u>not</u> like many of the things they do	☐	☐

Figure 1

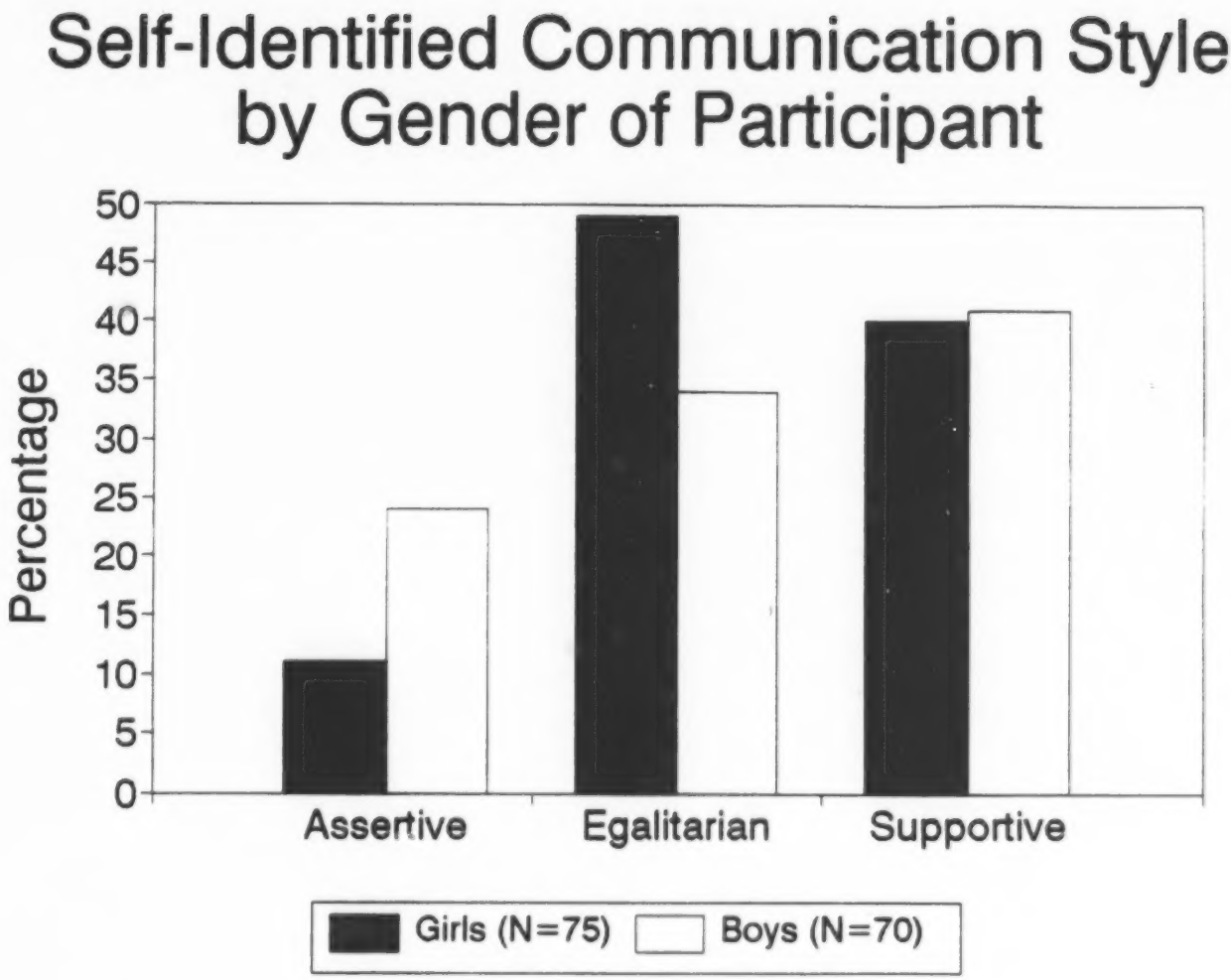

Self-Identified Communication Style by Gender of Participant
Percentage
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Assertive
Egalitarian
Supportive
Girls (N=75)
Boys (N=70)

Figure 2

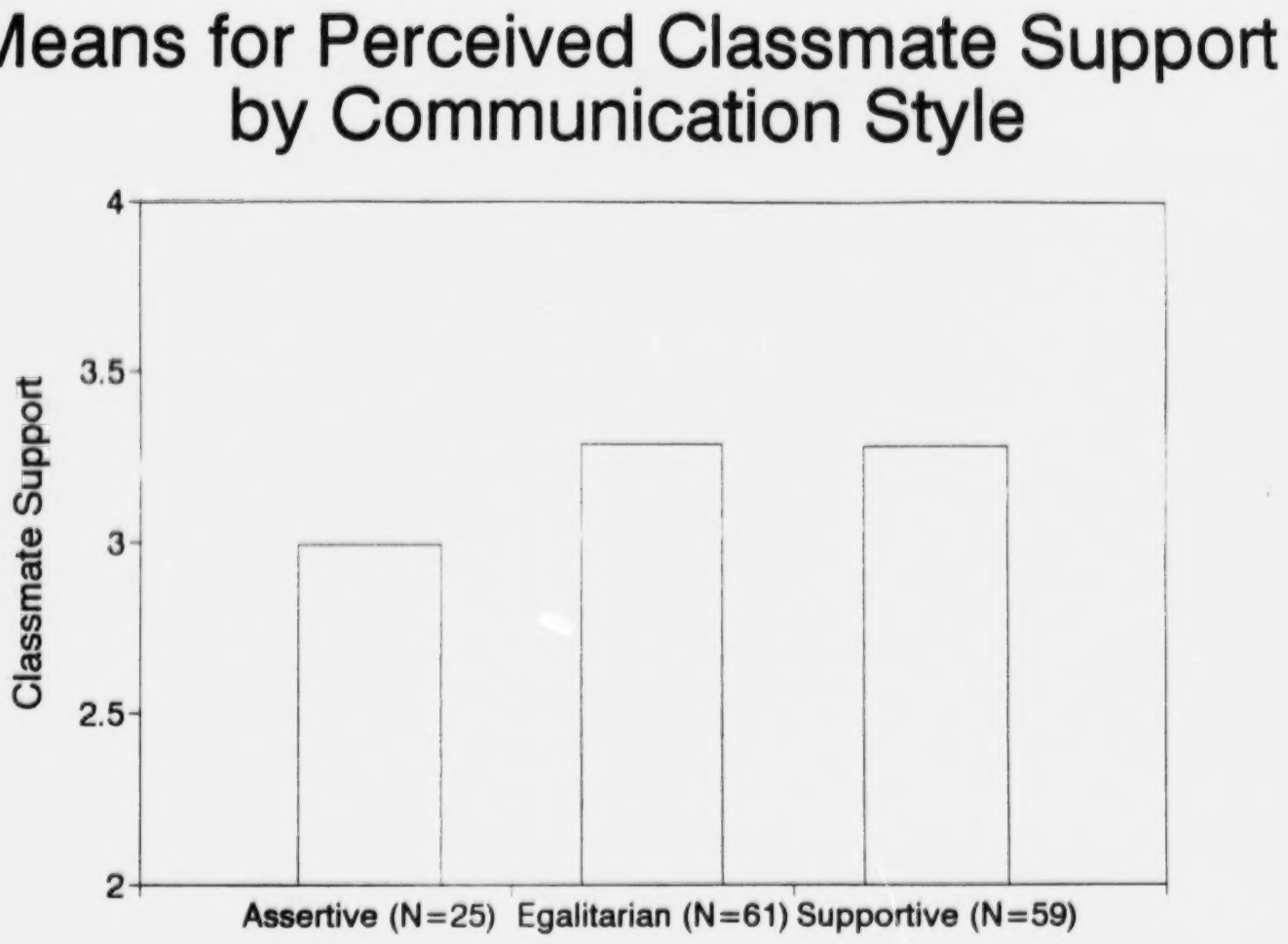

Means for Perceived Classmate Support by Communication Style
Classmate Support
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
Assertive (N=25)
Egalitarian (N=61)
Supportive (N=59)

Figure 3

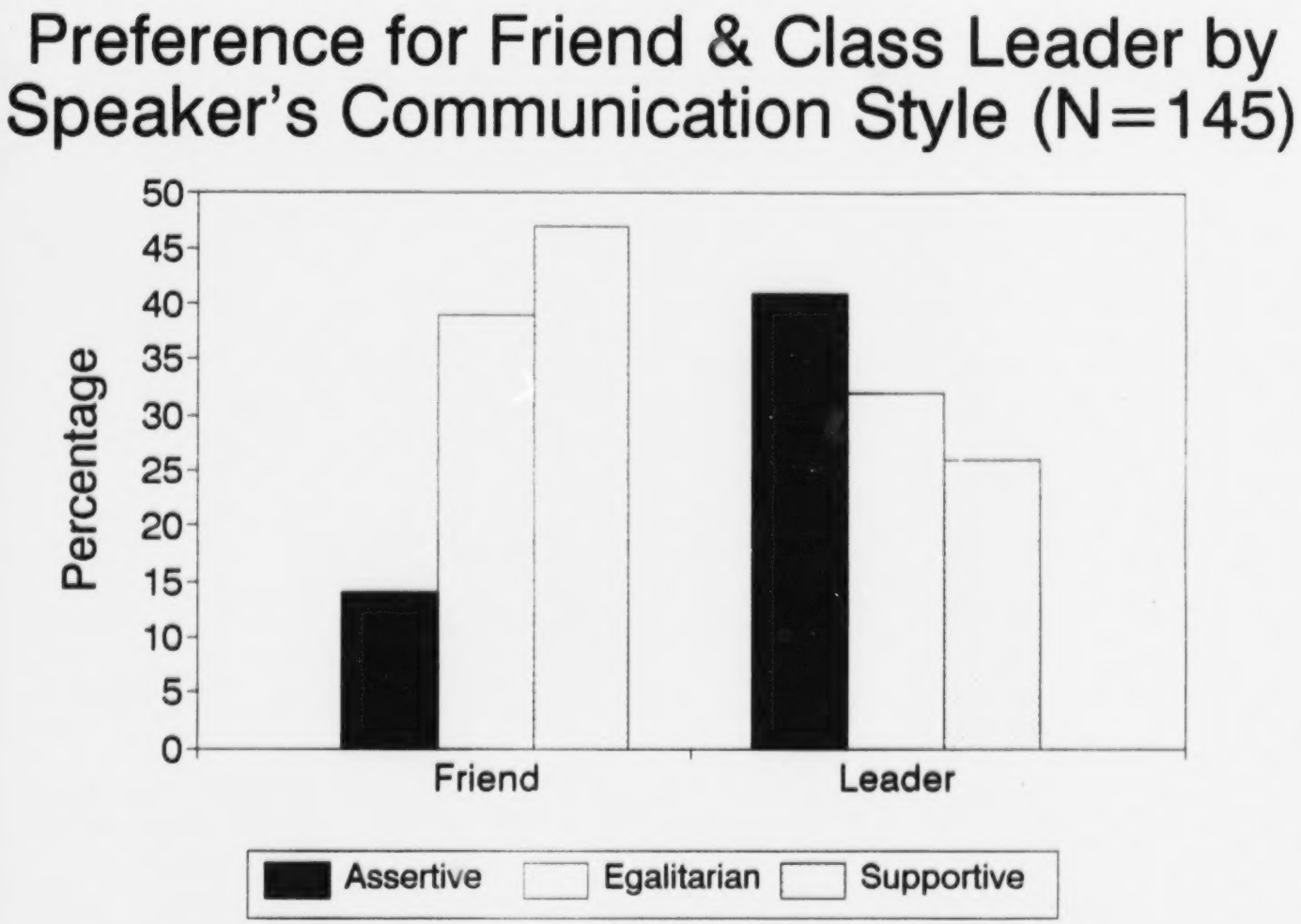
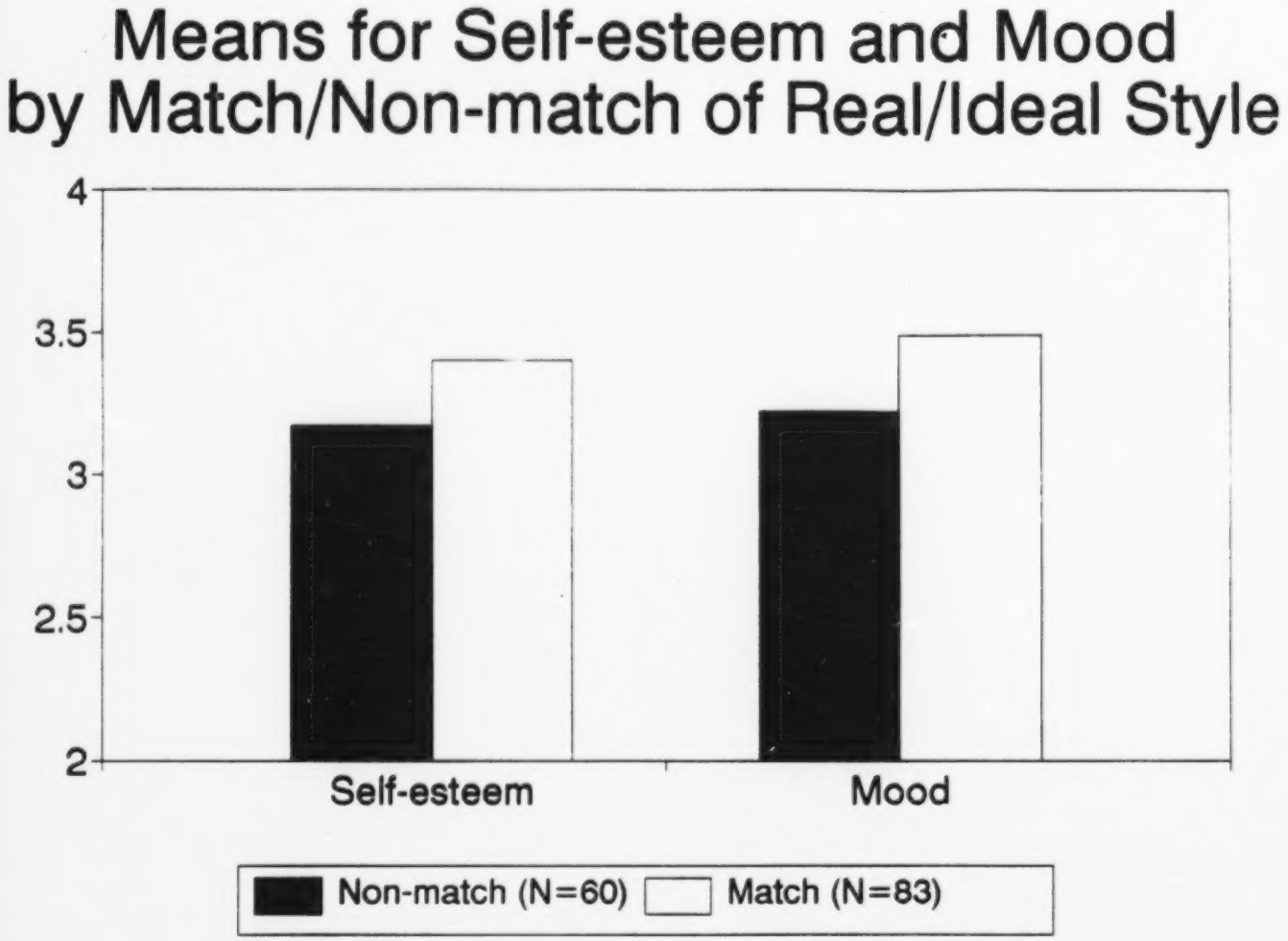

Preference for Friend & Class Leader by Speaker's Communication Style (N=145)
Percentage
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Friend
Leader
Assertive
Egalitarian
Supportive

Figure 4


Means for Self-esteem and Mood
by Match/Non-match of Real/Ideal Style
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
Self-esteem
Mood
Non-match (N=60)
Match (N=83)